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DEPT FOR SCA/FO DAS CAMP, SCA/A, PRM  
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG  
NSC FOR JWOOD  
OSD FOR SHIVERS  
CG CJTF-82, POLAD, JICCENT

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SUBJECT: CHARG'S MEETING WITH NEW MINISTER OF REFUGEES AND  
REPATRIATION SHEER MOHAMMAD ETEBARI

REF: Kabul 03856

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Charg Dell met with the new Minister of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR), Sheer Mohammad Etebari, and heard the Minister's ambitious plans to resettle returning Afghan refugees and bring stability to Afghanistan. The Charg stressed the USG commitment to Afghan refugees and urged Minister Etebari to enact needed reforms of the Ministry and the Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) program. The Minister asked for assistance in funding and staffing a team of outside advisors to help him. We will follow up on this idea and work with Etebari on developing a reform action plan.

#### Charg Urges Reform and Better Cooperation/Coordination

¶2. (SBU) The Charg congratulated the Minister on his new position and noted the importance of refugee issues for Afghanistan at this time. The Charg underscored that, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we support essential reform of the Ministry, increased focus and planning for the LAS program, improved cooperation with Iran and Pakistan on refugee issues, and increased coordination between MORR, the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, and other ministries. He stressed that the USG, as one of the largest refugee assistance donors, is committed to helping MORR develop successful programs and policies to assist Afghan refugees rebuild their lives.

#### The Minister's Non-Specific Plan to Achieve an Ambitious Agenda

¶3. (SBU) Minister Etebari described his plans to remove the squatters, including, sometimes, opportunistic government officials from the lands legally owned by refugees and internally displaced persons and return the lands to their rightful owners. He would also move skilled laborers into the LAS sites where the lack of productive agricultural land would not hinder their gainful employment. He believes there are only two or three LAS sites where land title has actually been transferred (Kabul Bari Kab, Alice Ghan, and Momozai - all in Kabul Province), and he supports limiting any new sites to those with proper site plans, rechargeable water sources, and accessibility to livelihood opportunities. Etebari then shared his grand vision of irrigating Afghanistan's drought-stricken areas with "steam from the Mediterranean" and "12-month" rivers, such as the Kunari river, capturing hydropower energy along the way. He hinted that the donor community could fund

these projects, which he claimed would also provide jobs for returnees and weaken the Taliban's influence.

14. (SBU) The Minister was non-specific as to how he would accomplish this ambitious agenda, but said he would present his ideas to the Cabinet in March. He will then send his staff to work their way systematically across the country and begin resolving the land title issues. He acknowledged, however, that his staff was largely unqualified and asked for assistance in developing a team of advisors. He believes he cannot remove the entrenched MORR office directors, since each of them "has a tank and an RPG behind him." He also suggested sending shuras of elders from opposite ends of the country to help communities work through land disputes. This idea is puzzling; it is hard to imagine sending presumably Pashtun elders to the Tajik north to settle conflicts successfully. But he welcomed the Charg's suggestion to work with USAID's program to establish a land tenure registry and help sort out Afghanistan's complicated real property issues.

No Engagement Yet on Pakistan and Iran

15. (SBU) Minister Etibari dodged the Charg's question regarding his contacts with Pakistan and Iran, claiming he had not previously reached out to his respective counterparts in those countries because it was not yet his job to do so. He seems anxious not to step on other Ministers' toes and not appear too ready to take over the reins. This reluctance is admirable in Afghanistan's hierarchical and deferential culture, but MORR needs a strong leader willing to create and enforce policies. He may need to feel better supported by the international community before he starts to exert his influence, if any.

Moving In The Right Direction

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16. (SBU) For all of Minister Etibari's seeming naivete and pie-in-the-sky ideas, his instincts are correct. He knows that he cannot reform MORR without outside assistance, that the lack of land and jobs is the biggest obstacle to successful and peaceful refugee resettlement, and that the entire community must benefit, or residents will resent the newly returned refugees. He even noted that donors should not provide money directly to the Ministry or it would be wasted. He is slowly introducing his ideas to the Cabinet and discussing them with relevant ministers, such as the Minister of Agriculture and Water. With internationally-funded advisors, Minister Etebari may yet be able to translate his vision, if not into the full-blown utopia he described, at least into a more rational and disciplined refugee resettlement policy than currently exists.

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